Nurturing Lifelong Philanthropists: Developmental Insights

Stephanie R. Stilson, PhD (Developmental Psychologist)
Sensory Technologies - EMBRACE Strategist for Client Empowerment
Naflion, LLC - Consultant

For those who recognize the ***fundamental value of philanthropic activity and want to empower lifelong serving habits in others***, it is critically important to understand how specific social factors and influences may impact development. Such understanding is necessary to empower mentors, create metrics-based curricula and fuel impactful programming and experiences for young people.

That is why clarity is sought on several points.
- Are there stable, predictable patterns for how youth become philanthropic?
- Are there familial, social and environmental factors that help (or hinder) the process?
- Are there specific skills that can be enhanced to promote caring behavior?

These are complex questions – not unlike those posed by human development theorists for decades. Developmental models often postulate linear paths - or stages - to describe how people change over time (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1924; Kohlberg, 1969). Yet humans do not live in isolation. The multiple interacting influences of family, friends and community on any given individual's development are significant and profound (e.g., Kagen, 1999; Baumrind, 1966; Steinberg, et al., 1992; Collins, et al., 2000), and they can be incredibly complex to depict (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Attempts to gain clarity on philanthropic development is further complicated because of the confusion and misunderstanding related to philanthropy's definition – in both formal scientific study and in casual, everyday usage. For example, how do philanthropic actions differ from compassionate ones? Do they differ from behaviors that reflect kindness, empathy, social awareness, or emotional intelligence? How much overlap exists among these concepts? These queries related to distinction become important when seeking insight from existing research. Can we assume, for

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The "Four Pillar Model" of youth philanthropy- **serving, giving, leading and engaging**- describes philanthropic action and highlights caring behaviors that impact the greater good.*

SERVING: Most young children naturally care first about their family members and notice their needs. Helping family is an extension of a caring attitude. Once youth demonstrate care within a family, it is an opportune time to talk about the importance of serving others in their school and community. From that simple (presumed innate) tendency, demonstrations of caring have the potential to progress to acts of giving.

GIVING: Giving time, talent, and treasure (such as toys, clothes, books, money) is a visible, concrete way to experience philanthropy as an individual. Youth will notice giving and volunteer habits demonstrated by family and friends. It is important to begin building and encouraging the spirit of generosity and caring at a young age to form a lifelong habit of giving.

LEADING: As youth become more independent and mobile, they may broaden their sphere of social interactions; therefore, their philanthropic behavior can be modeled for peers in their communities as acts of leadership. Youth leaders who model a philanthropic behavior will help others to learn from them and gain confidence in their own ability to give and serve. A philanthropic leader's caring actions encourage others to share their time, talent, and treasure for the common good.

ENGAGING: Youth often assume their role in communities is limited and that their voices will not be heard. As youth develop physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially, more impactful change-oriented acts of caring can occur as they engage other people and leverage additional resources. The ability to engage others to make a difference is unrelated to a person's age; youth can play the role of change-makers. Forming a Giving Circle or philanthropy club are excellent examples of youth magnifying their caring voices.

*This model was developed by the Youth Philanthropy Initiative of Indiana (YPII).

example, that the burgeoning scientific evidence related to 'empathy' can also be applied to our understanding of 'philanthropy?'

Philanthropy commonly is defined as the giving of one's time, talent or treasure for the benefit of the greater good. Thus stated, it suggests that those actions – giving time, talent or treasure – may or may not be accompanied by pro-social passion, goodwill feelings or fulfilling emotions. That is, someone can give money to a humanitarian cause purely for its tax-related benefit, and his/her act could be considered a philanthropic gesture even if there were no associated feelings of compassion. Similarly, a person may have a deeply empathic connection with another person and not take any particular *action* based on that feeling. Emotion, devoid of action, would not be considered philanthropic according to its common definition.

That is why a more comprehensive philanthropic model – such as the "Four Pillar Model of Youth Philanthropy" (see box insert) – is adopted for this discussion. It is assumed that *caring feelings* should be nurtured in conjunction with philanthropic *behaviors* (e.g., serving, giving, leading and engaging) across the lifespan. Further, theory and research related to empathetic emotion and similar constructs are presumed to be relevant and pertinent.

Three developmental insights emerge to guide practitioners in their effort to support and empower philanthropic development in youth.

Developmental Insight #1: Start Early & Be Sticky

Systemic influences on a person's development begin very early because infants arrive in the world fundamentally ready to learn – ready to construct knowledge within their experiences. While many have traditionally highlighted the 'survival instinct' of humans and suggested that competition and self-protection describe natural tendencies, more recent research suggests that there actually are fundamental inclinations for altruistic behavior (Keltner, 2009).   Studies of mirror neurons, for example, have shown that humans are wired for sociability and attachment to others. That is, people are compelled to connect with other people, and even very young children are incredibly sensitive to others' distress. Infants appear to be wired for social empathy (Roth-Hanania, et al., 2011). At the same time, infants are entirely dependent on others. While empathetic, caring tendencies may have deep (perhaps innate) roots, the very significant critical impact of a child's family and social environment cannot be diminished. That is, positive and negative influences on philanthropic development *start early!*

Erik Erikson (1950) posits that the quality of care in the first years of life plays an important role in the shaping of a child's personality because it is in this initial stage of development that children learn whether or not they can *trust*. "When I cry, can I trust that someone will help me?" It is the consistent, reliable nature of that assistance that matters most in early childhood. Much like the soothing motion of a rocking chair, the predictable pattern of receiving care after a cry for help establishes the foundation for healthy psychosocial development. It also may be where a seed sprouts and awaits nutrition to blossom into behaviors and attitudes that define a lifelong philanthropist.

Early Learning: In addition to helping establish *trust*, consistently practiced habits (e.g., bedtime routines, familiar songs and memorized poems) also provide the context for learning. That is, most people learn more easily when new information can be embedded within – or linked and compared to – something that already is understood. Trusting relationships lead to trust-filled environments where such learning can flourish and new behaviors can be practiced.

Consider how very young children learn new behaviors. Parents and educators label an action with a word. They name it, for example - *reading.* "Would you like me to read to you? Let's get a book to read. Shall we snuggle up to read?" Eventually, children begin to notice other people reading and can mimic and model their behaviors. They find special places to read. Some feel tremendous pride when they read - or by extension, choose to author their own stories for others to enjoy. By attaching a label to the behavior, children are equipped to understand this new behavior – called *reading*.

Consider how children learn a new emotion. Parents and educators label a perceived feeling with a word. They name it, for example - *sadness.* "You look sad. Are you sad? When your friend left today, did that make you sad?" Eventually, children can identify a feeling they experience using a specific word. They can model and mimic the emotion. They can identify it in others. By attaching a label to the feeling, children are better equipped to understand this new emotion – called *sadness*.

Now consider how children acquire an understanding of *philanthropy*. How might parents and educators successfully introduce and nurture fundamental learning related to caring behaviors in young children? Adults often seek behavioral examples of caring (e.g., serving, giving, leading and engaging) within family interactions and in stories, shows, songs and poems. Where possible, it is effective to acknowledge examples and then expand conversation to include the positive emotions that these actions generate. For example, "Thanks for putting away your toys today. When I saw that, it showed me that you care. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, and you know what? Because you helped, we will have more time to play outside tonight!"

Appropriate Vocabulary: While it is natural to want to "dumb down" words for young children, adults need not avoid using the term *philanthropy* because children are capable of expanded vocabulary. (Think how comfortable and agile children are rattling off expansive lists of dinosaurs, Pokémon and sports figures!) Where possible, adults should seek ways to attach – *to stick!* – philanthropic labels to desired behaviors. It is best to keep the terminology clear, concise and consistent. Further, the more standardized and similar the messaging is across all areas of a child's influence, the better. Additionally, it is important to be careful of one's own personal biases and misunderstandings. For example, many adults equate *philanthropy* with *wealthy people*, and that is an unfortunate misconception. Youth are amazingly open to grasping the perspective that caring actions encompass also time and talent. Adults should seek to validate that notion and empower youth to acknowledge the philanthropic worthiness of even small, non-monetary gestures.

When the goal is to nurture the developmental path of youth so that they are empowered to become lifelong philanthropists, caring behaviors should be methodically identified, consistently modeled, and enthusiastically discussed very early in a young person's life. Youth clearly do not develop in a vacuum, and they respond to the modeled behaviors they see and experience. The more frequently adults can stick definitional labels (and emotions) to specific behaviors that represent *philanthropy*, the better for impactful, lasting learning. Finally, adults should empower youth with a consistent philanthropic vocabulary as they help them identify caring behavioral examples in different places.

Developmental Insight #2: Focus on Behaviors & Actions

Humans learn best by *doing* and our behaviors often form our attitudes – not vice versa. "Not only will people sometimes stand up for what they believe, they will also come to believe in the idea they have supported. Many streams of evidence confirm that attitudes follow behavior" (Myers, 2010, p. 676). That logic may seem counterintuitive to some, but consider the following examples. If a person methodically, consistently begins each day with a spiritual reading, a vigorous walk or a gourmet breakfast, over time, he will increasingly see value in – and probably tell others about – the virtues of faith, exercise or good food!

Behavior Influences Attitude: Whether they realize it or not, adults help children form their attitudes because they encourage youth to behave in certain ways. Children become faith-based adults because they have attended weekly church services. Children become patriotic adults because they have said the Pledge of Allegiance, waved the flag, and honored the nation's holidays. Unfortunately, in a similar manner, negative behavioral habits can strengthen less healthy attitudes (e.g., racism, sexism and bigotry). It is very important, therefore, that adults are clear on their own priorities and tendencies because of the significant influence they can have on youth.

Interestingly, research found 80 percent of the youth in one study said their parents were more concerned with their achievement or happiness than whether they cared for others. The interviewees were also three times more likely to agree that "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I'm a caring community member in class and school" (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014, p. 1). Youth philanthropic organizations must work harder to communicate the growing evidence showing the benefits of volunteering - higher levels of positive emotions, better ability to regulate emotions, and fewer high-risk behaviors such as pregnancy and drug use (e.g., Nucci, 2014).

Assuming adults choose to make philanthropic development a priority, attempts should encourage 'behavioral habits' that reflect giving time, talent and treasure so that - over time - youth will formulate core beliefs in support of those caring habits. That is, adults should encourage a *focus on philanthropic behaviors and actions!* As youth develop (i.e., master motor skills, become more mobile, work/think more independently, express their feelings more accurately, etc.), families have greater opportunities to volunteer. The chance for adults to model social engagement and caring outside of the immediate family exponentially expands as they make philanthropic activities a daily, weekly or monthly routine.

Meaningful Acts: There are endless opportunities to demonstrate care through schools, clubs, service groups, civic organizations, and community organizations. Finding an opportunity is considerably easier than finding the *right* opportunity because it is important that adults proactively cultivate conditions for a 'good experience.' When possible the youth's skills and interests should match the activity. It is also often important for adults (educators, parents, etc.) to better understand how youth can contribute - that is, what they are capable of doing. While a certain amount of menial labor (such as raking leaves for elderly neighbors) is understandable, effort should be made to explain how the small acts weave into the larger picture of community needs. Simply telling youth to do it because it's 'compassionate and right' will not necessarily generate feelings of caring.

Routinely donating items and money, for example, establishes important early philanthropic habits; however, those actions alone produce a slightly sterile view of philanthropy's potential rewards. When youth work directly with people, they can begin to feel a stronger connection and develop relationships

with other members of the community. Adults should nurture an inquisitive mindset in youth by modeling and encouraging genuine curiosity about others – people in other neighborhoods, churches, schools, cities and countries.

Young people certainly should be encouraged to feel genuine compassion for others. Simultaneously, it is very important that adults help them recognize and cherish the awesome potential inherent in other people, especially those receiving assistance. Pity is not helpful within philanthropic effort because it is personally draining and rarely changes anyone's circumstance for the better. Curiosity, interest, awe and empathy, on the other hand, are helpful emotions to nurture within young philanthropists.

There admittedly must be a healthy balance between *stranger danger* and *healthy human curiosity of other people*. Safety conversations are critical because bad people lurk in many places – including among well-intentioned volunteer organizations. Oversight and verification of supervision is paramount. Further, volunteering in groups with family and friends is safer – and often more fun!

Prompting conversation with hypothetical consequences also can be an effective method to help youth see the meaning behind philanthropic effort. "Think about the people in this neighborhood who will not have a playground if there aren't enough participants in Saturday's walkathon. Can you picture them? They are people just like us. Can you imagine what it's like to not have grass near your home? To not be able to push your little sister on a swing and hear her laugh?" Anticipating consequences is not something most youth do well independently until their teen years. (And many still don't, even then.) Practicing 'if this, then that' conversations around philanthropic behavior can help strengthen broader cognitive development and may make an elusive idea such as philanthropy, more concrete.

In sum, neuroscience confirms that habits quite literally leave their marks on the human brain (Duhigg, 2014); therefore, when the goal is to nurture the developmental path of youth so they are empowered to become lifelong philanthropists, start early, be sticky – and focus on philanthropic behaviors. Opportunities for youth to engage directly with people in a safe environment should be cultivated. Youth should be empowered to develop a healthy curiosity for others as they mindfully focus on offering their time, talent and treasure for the community's benefit.

Developmental Insight #3: Plan for Expanded Influences

As youth continue to develop and gain independence, there are expanded opportunities to learn from and interact with different people. Youth progress from having primary exposure to their family's values to also having exposure to others' values, and these environmental influences (other families, friends, community organizations, faith-based institutions, schools, mentors, curricula, media, etc.) will either help or hinder developmental outcome. Their influences rarely are all-good or all-bad, and they rarely occur spontaneously (i.e., at a specific moment in time or in reaction to a single triggering event). Rather, effects are cumulative and often challenging to isolate.

Discernment: Similar to the thoughtful conversation regarding the balance between 'stranger danger' and 'empathetic concern for others,' youth benefit from ongoing conversations related to philanthropic fraud. At some point in today's 24-hour news cycle, youth will learn about organizations and people who deceive to get money from others who believe they are making honest, well-intended donations.

Not all youth are able to discern the cognitive nuances inherent in many of these situations; therefore, proactively talking about this modern-day reality may help youth avoid unhealthy mistrust and cynicism toward all philanthropic entities.

It can seem ironic that adults exude so much effort establishing trust in young children – only then to be forced to help youth methodically temper their trust in an effort to avoid strangers, fraud, disinformation, etc. It is critically important, regardless. In the same way that adults guide youth to verify the accuracy of news stories, they also must arm youth with the ability to determine if philanthropic organizations do, indeed, use the time, talent and treasure of others for the common good. Learning to discern the accuracy and validity of information is critical in many areas of youth development. Philanthropic understanding and growth is no different.

Another challenge for adults is to help youth discern the difference between 'being nice' and 'being nice in a way that achieves a greater good.' Many distinguish between *acts of kindness* versus genuine philanthropy. Philanthropy requires intentional, ongoing actions; therefore, adults should encourage expanded vision so that youth will come to understand that personal philanthropic acts can have very significant social impact.

Empathetic Leadership: There are so many books, models, quotes, theories, and personally ingrained definitions related to leadership, that it is incredibly difficult to talk about – especially within a model of philanthropy. Most typically, leadership is defined as the behavior of those who hold title positions within an organization (e.g., president, vice president, etc.). Genuinely compassionate leaders may or may not hold title positions, but they do have qualities that make them unique. Not unexpectedly, many of those qualities overlap with the life skills found in youth who consistently are engaged in philanthropic efforts.

The Search Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota identified specific building blocks (40 Developmental Assets) which identify a set of skills, experiences, relationships, and behaviors that enable young people to develop into successful and contributing adults. Studies of more than four million young people consistently show that the more assets they have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors - and the more likely they are to thrive. With regard to youth development, YPII acknowledges a strong connection with 22 of the 40 Assets when young people are involved with youth philanthropy in their communities (Youth Philanthropy Initiative of Indiana, 2015). Indeed, when youth possess higher numbers of assets, they are more likely to do well in school, be civically engaged, and value diversity. The correlative overlap between the 40 Developmental Assets and the behaviors featured in YPII's "Four Pillar Model of Youth Philanthropy" appear significant.

In sum, when the goal is to nurture the developmental path of young people so they are empowered to become lifelong philanthropists, the role of those outside the youth's immediate family must be considered and championed when possible. Having encouraged a healthy interest and curiosity in people other than themselves, youth must be empowered to compassionately lead people from all walks of life. With that empowerment comes a healthy dose of discernment and a proactive understanding of how philanthropic organizations function. Finally, where possible, adults should draw comparisons between key life skills practiced and learned through philanthropic engagement and various skillsets that are valued in other areas of life– including decision making and critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

The desire to understand how youth change over time is very strong.   Many seek predictable developmental patterns in cognitive, social and emotional growth so that proactive assistance and impactful intervention can occur.   Parents, for example, seek understanding to parent more effectively. Educators seek understanding to teach more strategically. Legal systems seek understanding to adjudicate more appropriately.   Those who seek to encourage lifelong caring habits in youth also require developmental understanding and guidance so that they can more effectively empower mentors, create metrics-based curricula and fuel impactful programming and experiences.

In closing, for those who see value in nurturing lifelong philanthropists, there are several factors to consider along a youth's developmental path. A broad, comprehensive vision of the individual is helpful – one that respects the rapid growth and change related to the child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. The 'constant changes' associated with their development is one reason why it is important to 'start early and be sticky' with consistent vocabulary and examples that reflect caring behaviors. Most people learn best by doing; therefore, effort should be made to find appropriate, diverse, meaningful ways for youth to offer their time, talent and treasure for the common good. Frequent opportunities for youth to engage directly with people in safe environments should be cultivated so a compassionate interest in others can blossom. Finally, as youth become more independent, they will be exposed to the expanded influence of others. With that exposure should come a healthy dose of discernment and a proactive understanding of how philanthropic organizations function. Most importantly, youth should be encouraged to appreciate the awesome, limitless power of the human spirit to make a difference – especially when engaged in caring behaviors.

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